Students as emergent leaders in small groups in the language classroom

What this research was about and why it is important
Teachers and researchers are interested in how factors such as language proficiency and age influence how students interact in small groups in the language classrooms, but there are relatively few studies that consider how group dynamics, including group roles, may impact on the interaction. This study was the first in language education to consider how emergent leaders may influence the way that students interact. Emergent leaders are people who are not given an official role of leader, and do not have any of the power assigned to leaders, but who become the unofficial leader who influences and controls the group. Students were put into fixed groups and leadership was measured. Students also completed group conversation tests which were then analyzed to examine how leadership influenced student engagement in the conversation. Results showed that emergent leadership was important, influencing engagement in conversation, but also the quality of the conversation and the levels of silence within each group. The results are important in helping teachers and researchers understand what is happening when students interact in groups, and how this potentially influences language learning.

What the researchers did
● First year university students in an oral English class in Japan were randomly assigned to small groups of three or four people that were then fixed for an entire semester.
● Students worked together in groups of three or four students to complete tasks and took part in mid-term and end of term group conversation tests. The tests were ten minutes in length and were video recorded for analysis. Student behavioral engagement during tests was measured by calculating the individual talk-time for each student.
● Students rated other group members on how much leadership they displayed, and this was used to predict the level of engagement in conversation tests. Based on the ratings, from the twenty groups, three groups were chosen to represent each of the categories of strong leadership, moderate leadership, and weak or no leadership, and group interactions were analyzed in closer detail.
● Finally, the conversation tests of the nine groups were studied for evidence of language learning.

What the researchers found
● Results showed that leadership, rather than English proficiency, predicted student engagement in the conversation tests.
● Analysis of conversations showed that strong leaders encourage participation from all group members, helping the conversation to flow smoothly and reducing the amount of silence.
● Groups with weak leaders struggled to make conversation and tended to produce monologues rather than engaging with the answers of other group members.
● With regard to language learning, strong leaders seemed to discourage the discussion of language such as vocabulary, and groups with weaker leaders spent more time discussing language choices.

Things to consider
● Emergent leadership is important in understanding student engagement in group conversations.
● Teachers should consider emergent leadership when creating groups in the language classroom, as it may influence group performance.
● Researchers should consider emergent leadership as a potential variable influencing student interaction.
● The study had a small number of participants and therefore findings should be interpreted with caution.
● The researcher was also the teacher for the students, potentially influencing results.
● Future studies should consider how emergent leadership may influence growth in English proficiency.


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